



The Episcopal Diocese of Long Island

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Sermon for the Sixth Sunday of Pentecost

July 12, 2020

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Assisting Bishop of Long Island

In the name of our loving God, Amen.

The gospel reading we've just heard is the parable of the sower, but today I would like to name it the parable of the seeds. And this time we're living in is a time of seeds. What happens if the seeds that we sow are good and what happens if they're bad?

I want to talk about seeds and our DNA; my own DNA growing up in the American South. My time as Bishop diocesan in Buffalo. Our DNA as a nation, that has said one thing and done other things to people of color. Our DNA as Christians and the DNA of this diocese equal parts transcendent beauty and work for justice that uniquely equips us to lead the fight for a world that looks like God's dream, not the nightmare of hatred and injustice we've often created.

I say this as we mourn the loss of 120,000 Americans to COVID-19, as we face economic collapse, and as Black and White Americans together say no more to the death of people of color at the hands of police.

We have only to pay attention to the media or walk outside, and we hear this. The streets are speaking. You need to listen to them.

I grew up in the 1950s in Mississippi, perhaps the epicenter of racism in the US. I think there was a strain of abolitionism in our family, even before the civil war. In 1956 in our town of Brookhaven, a Black man walked to the courthouse, intending to vote for Dwight D. Eisenhower as president of the United States. As he placed his feet on the steps of the courthouse, a White man shot him dead. And nothing was ever done about this. This infuriated my grandmother who was a woman of deep faith.

She began to invite African-American friends and White friends together to her dining room table. They sat there and enjoyed a meal. One day a man from the Ku Klux Klan,

knocked on her door and said, "Miss Eddy, you must stop doing that, or you'll be hurt". And she said, "I will not stop."

The image of those Black and White hands together and of her bravery changed my attitude toward race at the age of nine.

Fast forward now to 2010 when I was elected as the diocese bishop of Western New York, headquartered in Buffalo. The city's population is 40% Black. Our presiding bishop, Michael Curry grew up there at St. Philip's Church in Buffalo, where his father was the rector and Bishop Curry was ordained deacon in St. Paul's Cathedral in Buffalo. As the bishop beginning in 2011, I worked hard for racial equity in the diocese that harbored racism.

One of the projects that was dearest to my heart was to change a group of unused church buildings in the town north of Buffalo into a service center for the African Americans who lived around the church. I obtained from foundations \$750,000 to do this.

The parish had once been a center of White elite and their descendants had a privilege that they did not want to give up. So they went to the authorities of the town and they halted my project. I had to take the money back to the foundations, an action that broke my heart.

On Sunday morning, an African-American woman came to the church to worship and afterwards to the coffee hour. On the coffee table, there was a silver pitcher. She began to pour cream into her coffee and a matriarch of the parish who'd been against my project, came up to her and took the cream out of her hand and said, "That cream is not for you." She gave her a container of powdered milk.

That is what White supremacy looks like. That cream is not for you.

The notion of White supremacy has been part of our nation's DNA since the first enslaved people were brought here 401 years ago. The authors of our Declaration of Independence, some of them slave owners, wrote documents that said that all men are created equal. Yet in their next document, they declared that Black people count for only three-fifths of a person for the purposes of congressional elections.

We've told ourselves that the monuments to leaders of the Confederacy pay tribute to Southern heritage. When in fact they remind people of color what the real DNA of the nation is.

We deluded ourselves that separate meant equal. Episcopal church shares in this shame. My colleague, the very Reverend Kelly Brown Douglas, puts it this way, "We were the church of the slaveholders. We also supported the narrative of White supremacy."

As our own Bishop Lawrence Provenzano has written in his letter to the diocese, White supremacy continues to break the soul of our nation. The sin of White supremacy has stolen away any claim that we are a great nation and that our nation is being stained by this hatred of White supremacy.

Our DNA as Christians calls us now to reject racism and embrace diversity as obviously as we say the Lord's Prayer or celebrate the eucharist. That goal, that hope is embedded in every word in the letters of the apostle Paul. In every deed and action of our Lord, Jesus Christ this hope for the unity and dignity of all is baked in.

From the very beginning, the Diocese of Long Island has struggled--sometimes successfully, sometimes with failure--to live into that Christian DNA, with the commitment, both to great places of worship, but also great actions of justice.

In the 1860s, Abram Littlejohn, who was the first diocesan bishop of Long Island wanted The Holy Trinity, the procathedral, to be a center both of splendid worship and music but also of Christian activism, particularly resettlement of immigrants.

The successor as the rector of The Holy Trinity, Charles Hall had been a courageous minister to slaves in South Carolina in the 1850s. When he came to The Holy Trinity in the 1880s, he built an alliance with St. Augustine's, the oldest Black majority parish in Brooklyn. He worked to finance the place of worship for Saint Augustine's. But as Father Lawrence Womack, the current rector has told me, "While there was a needed space for my church and an important sharing of space—the best of White *noblesse oblige*—the vestry ultimately voted not to allow St. Augustine's to acquire and worship in that space.

In 1904, John Howard Mellish became the rector of the pro-cathedral and made it a center of social activism. In 1939, his son William Howard Mellish became the assistant rector and Mellish was one of the very first fundraisers for the Southern civil rights movement in the North. He was an advocate against White supremacy. For this reason, he was investigated by Senator Joseph McCarthy and Roy Cohn. In fact, somebody tacked a sign on the outdoors of the Holy Trinity that said, "Beware, commie preachers inside!"

But the younger Mellish had the final word and of all the clerics of the world, he was invited to preach the funeral homily in 1963 for the great civil rights leader, W.E.B Dubois. What an honor for this diocese.

To Mellish, Dubois was his spiritual father, a new Elijah. He quoted these words of Dubois in his sermon, "Back of the problem of race and color lies a greater problem, which both obscures and implements this, the fact that so many civilized persons are willing to live in

comfort, even if the price is poverty and disease for a majority of their fellow citizens." This is still true.

Our struggle has continued in more recent times. On the one hand this diocese is poised to be a leader of the Episcopal Church in working against White supremacy. We have dozens of ethnic groups.

On the other hand, Long Island has a history of red lining and restrictive covenants, which has kept out minorities. When our Cathedral of the Incarnation in Garden City wanted to build affordable housing, the city authorities rejected their plan and said, "We don't want those people in our neighborhood."

I want to share another story told to me by the Reverend Canon Cecily Broderick. Beginning in 1904, she says, "the diocese started three Black-only missions." One of these was St. John's church in Hempstead, a Black mission not far from St. George's Hempstead, a White church, which had in fact been founded by the English crown. In 1956, 11 days before Christmas St. John's burned down. The parishioners went to various congregations and said, "Can we worship with you on Christmas Eve?" No one would talk to them.

Finally, St. George's responded, "You cannot worship with us, but we will give you a little room behind our kitchen, where you can have your Christmas services." They stayed there for six months, but then they said, "We're tired of this." They rented a storefront building until the diocese was able to build them a new church in 1966. Mother Broderick became their rector in 1991.

The diocese has elected two Black suffragan bishops, Black diocesan bishops and we're blessed by the presence of Daniel Allotey, our Episcopal colleague who serves as one of our assisting bishops. One of those Black suffragans was pointedly asked not to live in Garden City in the 1960s and minority visitors still in the 60s to the Cathedral would often be followed by the police in the train station to the [Cathedral of the] Incarnation.

Canon Glenworth Miles has told me this story: A similar experience years ago, he said, "My warden and I had enrolled in a class at Mercer. After the class one day, we started driving back to Brooklyn, but I got lost. I couldn't find my way to the expressway so I stopped and asked some residents, 'How do I get to the expressway?' They greeted us with looks of disgust. Finally, a good Samaritan from a local gas station gave us directions, ordered us to the expressway, and we could get right back to Brooklyn."

Martin Luther King believed that the destiny of Black Americans is tied up with American destiny. Father Womack told me recently that American destiny requires that now we work together in spite of the exhaustion of so many Black people in our church working on this issue. He said, "We must work together."

So Bishop Provenzano has outlined some ways that we might work together so that our good Christian DNA can be active in us so that we might redistribute our resources that reflect our opposition to a racialized system. That we could do community-needs assessment to listen to our minority neighborhoods and ask them, "How can we help you?" So that we might, in fact, open our spaces and allow those who are marching, a place to rest or open the interior spaces of our church so that young Black leaders can gather to plan and think and pray about the future of their movement.

We must go forward in active promotion of these ventures because this is a historic time in our country and for our church. We're being asked at this moment to choose between liberation for everybody or continue slavery to the ideas that destroy.

Our DNA as Christians gives us hope this morning. It gives us a sense of purpose and above all, it gives us the will and the wisdom now to seek liberty and justice for all.

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In the name of our loving God, Amen.